

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS E F T O SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000209

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE/NOFORN

DEPT FOR NEA/ARPI (TROBERTS), G/TIP
DEPT ALSO FOR DRL/IL (JDEMARIA), DRL/CRA (SCOOKIE, DDOLAN
STATE PASS USTR (JBUNTIN, WCLATANOFF)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/07/2015

TAGS: PHUM SCUL PGOV ELAB MU

SUBJECT: CAMEL RACING, FROM TOP DOWN TO BOTTOM UP

REF: MUSCAT 00164

Classified By: Ambassador Richard L. Baltimore III.

Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

1. (SBU/NF) During a February 3 camel race organized by prominent Omanis and Emiratis, the Ambassador heard directly from the senior royal family member heading Oman's Camel Federation on why abuses of camel jockeys that reportedly take place in the UAE are absent in Oman. The official cited that fact that camel racing has remained an integral part of Bedouin society in Oman for both boys and girls, obviating the need to import jockeys from other countries. PolOff's first-hand observations of the races, including conversations with young jockeys, supported the royal family member's claims. As UAE camel owners brought their steeds but no jockeys, this appears to have been a rare instance where Omani riders were paid to take on those temporary duties. No element of abuse or coercion was in any way evident. End summary.

KENTUCKY DERBY, CAMEL-STYLE

2. (SBU/NF) On February 3, the Ambassador and PolOff attended a regional camel race in Oman's Dakhiliyah region that was the brainchild of UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan and presided over by Yahya bin Mahfoudh al-Mantheri, president of Oman's State Council. The festive race was held on the sprawling desert estate of host His Highness Sayyid Asa'ad bin Tariq al-Said, a first cousin of the Sultan and president of the Oman Equestrian and Camel Federation. Unlike the modest Bedouin races in local communities (reftel), the regional race at al-Bashair brought together racing enthusiasts and elites from as far afield as Salalah and the United Arab Emirates. In what might be described as the "Kentucky Derby" of Omani camel racing, invitees included government dignitaries, wealthy expatriates, a few diplomats, and local Bedouin tribes.

SAYYID ASA'AD DENIES ABUSES IN OMAN

3. (SBU/NF) One of the few diplomats invited, the Ambassador had the opportunity both during the races and in a subsequent tour of the estate to discuss camel racing with Sayyid Asa'ad. Sayyid Asa'ad said he was very familiar with the abuses of camel jockeys in the UAE, attributing them to the fact that the sport of camel racing had effectively died out in the Emirates, forcing Emirati racing enthusiasts to "import" both trainers and jockeys from other countries. Camel racing in Oman, on the other hand, always was and has remained a bedrock of the Bedouin culture. For that reason, there are no foreign nationals involved in the sport in Oman. (Note: His British business manager confided separately to the Ambassador that he had never heard of a non-Omani jockey in the Sultanate. End note.) Sayyid Asa'ad assured the Ambassador that any assumption of coercion or abuse of camel jockeys in Oman is completely unfounded and "outrageous."

4. (SBU/NF) Sayyid Asa'ad noted that he had had to explain the differences between camel racing in the UAE and Oman to the UK's Princess Anne during a prior visit. She had assumed that there was no difference in UAE and Omani practices. He explained to her how he was proud of the fact that camel racing remains a vital part of village life throughout the Sultanate, and that both boys and girls (typically 10-11 years old) participate equally. Nevertheless, he is intrigued by some of the changes the UAE is undertaking, including a study on the use of robots to replace jockeys. Sayyid Asa'ad revealed that the Oman Equestrian and Camel Federation had run experiments using two such robots on camels the previous week, and that the camels did not seem to mind their mechanical substitutes.

GROUND-LEVEL VIEW: ALL OMANIS, BUT SOME PAID

15. (SBU/NF) While the VIP's were ensconced in their grandstand perches at the finish line, PolOff observed the action up-close three kilometers away, where the camels, jockeys, trainers and jeeps were lining up for the first race at the 3 kilometer marker. The crowd was a solid mix of Omanis and Emiratis, with many of the Emiratis bringing their own camels and trainers, but not jockeys. A 20-something Sudanese trainer who had raced camels in Dubai as a youngster and now served as a trainer for a UAE camel breeder. In this showcase where winning camels can sell for upwards of USD 262,000, only a few Omani camels took home prizes on this day (just one first-place finish out of five heats). PolOff observed the fierce competition among young Omani jockeys for the offer of 20 riyals (about USD 50) to race the UAE camels for visiting Emiratis. A finish among the top five would net these "hired" jockeys additional prize money of USD 786.

16. (SBU/NF) While the race at Sayyid Asa'ad's estate in al-Bashair was certainly larger and more prestigious than those in local villages, it was nonetheless a rather traditional event centered around the Bedouin culture of the area. Every one of the nearly two dozen jockeys with whom PolOff spoke were Omani and from known camel-racing villages such as Biddiya, al-Qabil, and Sur. As in other races, both boys and girls were present. Dressed in their best outfits, the children were accompanied by family relatives and appeared healthy, cheerful, and full of spunk.

HOW THE RACE IS RUN

17. (SBU/NF) About six miles off the main road in the desert community of al-Bashair (some 180 km southwest of Muscat), Sayyid Asa'ad's racetrack is as informal and modest as other tracks throughout Oman. Surrounded by some bar fencing, the 15-kilometer track forms a large oval in the desert. Markers are posted the length of the course to designate the 3 km, 4 km, 5 km, 6 km and 8 km starting points.

18. (SBU/NF) As the camels took off, the jeeps jammed with trainers raced alongside the track, shouting support and instructions through transistor radios tied to the jockeys. (NOTE: An ambulance kept pace with the riders along the interior of the track.) The heat ended as the gathering dust cloud reached the finish line in front of the viewing grandstand. The winning camel received a ritual feeding by local Bedouin women, after which all of the riders, camels, and drivers would head back out to the next marker and start over again. Each race proceeded in identical fashion, taking about 20 minutes to organize and run.

19. (SBU/NF) Spectators of all ages and both genders assembled at the finish line to enjoy the entertainment. As the crowd anxiously waited for the camels to come into sight, spectators were treated to dancing, music, and an array of cultural displays by the local community. The excitement came to a climax as the fifth and last heat ended. The boisterous crowd, held back by a swarm of Royal Oman Police, gathered to witness the prize distribution by State Council President Yahya al-Mantheri. The proud owners of first-place finishers in each heat were awarded a new Toyota LandCruiser. Swords were given to the second place finishers, and cash prizes went to the owners whose steeds placed third, fourth, and fifth.

COMMENT

10. (SBU/NF) While we cannot attest first-hand to what may go on with camel racing in neighboring countries, we have neither seen nor heard of anything in Oman to suggest that the young Omani jockeys are in any way mistreated or coerced. Rather, the sport is deeply ingrained into the cultural heritage of Omani families, and regulated by the most rigorous norm imaginable - the parental bond. While initially concerned about the Emirati participation in this race, we were happy to find that UAE-based jockeys did not take part. The fact that some Omani kids who normally race for free were given payment by Emirati owners to jockey their camels does not, in our view, constitute child labor.
BALTIMORE